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NERVE

By MARTIN KNAPP.

PART III.

Ben reported that it had begun to rain again and that the water hadn't gone down any. Watching him it seemed to me that he had something on his mind. He seemed suddenly like quite a different individual from the one who only a few minutes before had been writhing and twisting under Bixby's gibes.

He kept smiling to himself and slapping his hat vigorously against his knee, as though emphasizing some thought. After smiling for a while, he suddenly got up, put on his faded overcoat and went out.

It was raining hard, I noticed, as I opened my window for the night. Early in the morning I was aroused by what seemed unusual noises in the village street below—men's voices, and more feet than usual on the sidewalk.

As soon as I came down the stairs I realized that something was up. Ambrose Peck was not in his usual place and an air of desertion hung over the hotel.

"Where is everyone?" I asked as my breakfast was being brought in.

"Why, ain't you heard?" the waitress demanded breathlessly. "We got a real flood. The water's up over the road to the station and the bridge is clean gone. Everybody's down there lookin' at it. You better hustle through your breakfast quick as you can and go right down there. They say it's a sight."

I ate as quickly as possible and set off toward the valley.

What the girl had said was true. Most of the town of Woodstock lined the banks of what was now a broad brown river, filling all the lowlands.

It was not an especially angry torrent; the ground was too flat for that. Rather it was a slow-flowing stream of muddy water on which floated branches, logs and now and then a crate. One end of the bridge was visible, but the other had entirely disappeared.

As I joined the group at the point where the road ducked under the water, I was immediately surrounded by a proud citizenry.

"Ain't it a sight?" Thomas asked. "Did you ever seen anythin' like it? Higher'n it was in 1902."

I don't know how long we had been there, marveling at the work of Nature, when the sound of an approaching vehicle made us all turn and we saw Bixby driving down the road in a buggy with the top raised. He drew up with a flourish, and it was evident that he was surprised and somewhat concerned.

"I've got to get over to the railroad," he explained. "Got to get out to the city."

Seth Thomas laughed. "Ought to have the railroad on this side, Earl."

"Would I have time to drive up the east road and get across at Bingly?"

"East road's closed up. You can't get through."

"Say, that's right," Bixby admitted.

"You might go up over the hill," someone suggested.

"What good would that do me?" he demanded crossly. "Would take me two hours to get to Nelson over that rotten road and I'd be further away from the railroad than I am now."

The men nodded.

"Better telephone," Peck suggested.

Bixby looked at him disdainfully, remarking, "What I got to do can't be done over any telephone. I got one big deal on, I tell you. I got to get out to town and I'm goin' to. That's me. That's why I am where I am today. When I got business to do, I do it, see? I don't stand around and holler 'It can't be done.'"

The men shifted about, exchanging glances. Bixby took a few steps up the road and came back.

"Anybody got a boat?" he asked.

I saw a smile slide across Ambrose Peck's mouth and disappear behind his ear. He opened his mouth and closed it.

Jabe Ellis said slowly, "What'd anybody have a boat fer? You couldn't float a boat on the creek usually."

"Now, see here," Bixby explained, as though no one realized the situation, "this is serious. I'll pay well if you can get me across there. There must be some way."

The group shrugged and shook their heads.

I saw red creeping up the back of Bixby's neck. He exploded into a tirade against the elements, the country, and his foolishness in coming up there at this time of the year.

The people listened placidly. No great sorrow was evidenced at the plight of their fellow citizen. With them, what could not be done to-day could be done to-morrow. The rain kept drizzling down and Bixby continually hitched his collar up about his neck to keep it out. Rain is a great commonizer and he had lost some of the bluff distinction he possessed when dry.

Suddenly Ezra Meeker uttered a shrill squeal and pointed.

"Look a there, look a there!" he cried.

The crowd instantly was at attention.

Coming down stream some distance off was a squat object with oars rising and falling tempestuously.

Bixby's voice was one great hymn of triumph. "There!" he ejaculated. "I knew something would turn up. I tell you, boys, it always does if you think it will, see. I never see it fail."

The boat drew nearer. Some of the men shouted, but Ben Hooper's vigorously propelling back never wavered.

Meeker danced about, crying, "Well, the old coot! He got that old tub of hisn. Guess he'll be able to lend it to somebody now."

On the fast-flowing tide the old flat-bottomed boat came on rapidly. A short distance from the shore Ben turned around, guided the boat deftly up against two fence posts and rested on his oars.

"Well, well, well," Bixby called to him. "Good old Ben! You've saved my life this time, Ben. Pull up and take me across. I got to get the nine-forty-five."

Hooper dabbled the creaking oars in the water.

"Never see the water so high in all my life," he announced.

"Hey, pull up!" Bixby urged.

Hooper did not seem to hear.

"Awful strong current," he informed us. "Pretty hard to handle a boat out here."

Various remarks came from the crowd. Earl Bixby stood leaning far out over the edge of the water.

"Hey, I ain't got much time, I tell you. Pull up here."

Ben splashed the oars.

"Say, what's the matter? I'll give you ten dollars, Ben, to take me across."

"Why, Earl, you want to get over to the other side?" Ben's mild voice inquired.

"Sure, I want to!"

"Well, now I tell you, Earl. It's kind of risky out here. Awful strong current. I don't jest know as I'd want to take the risk of gettin' you across. Ain't there somethin' in the law 'bout being liable when you undertake to carry folks for pay? You're a pretty important man, Earl, and I'd hate to be liable if anything happened to you."

"Come on, come on! You'll make me miss my train. I'll take the risk." He laughed, but with not quite his usual gusto.

"No," Ben answered. "I can't take a chance on bein' liable."

Bixby waved his arms over the edge of the water.

"Well, what do you want? I'll buy your darned old boat and row myself across."

A bright smile spread over Ben Hooper's face. "Well now, Earl," he ejaculated, "I hadn't thought of that. That's a good idea. If you was to own the boat and run it, why I wouldn't be liable, now would I?"

The large man, hanging over the water, tried to squeeze the exasperation out of his voice.

"No, of course you wouldn't, Ben. I'll take all the chances. Come on now; hurry up! How much do you want for the old thing? I'll give you twenty-five dollars."

"My goodness, Earl," Hooper explained, "I couldn't sell for that. I had this here boat fer a long time. It's just about all I own. I wouldn't want to part with it fer that."

"All right, all right! How much?"

"Well, quite a spell ago I learned that boats was pretty expensive. This one ought to be worth quite a lot to you. You could probably make pretty big interest on it. I guess, take it all in all——"

Unable to contain himself any longer, Bixby shouted: "Never mind! Never mind all that! Tell me how much you want and I'll pay you."

For some moments Ben sat thoughtful. In the group on the shore, men nudged each other and grinned. We all waited.

At last Hooper said: "Now, Earl, I don't want to be unreasonable. But I got a lot invested in boats. If I don't get back outn this one what I got invested in the others, why, I won't get another chance, I guess. I reckon if you'd give me twenty-five hundred dollars fer it, why, I'd sell."

Everyone on shore gasped.

"Twenty-five hundred dollars!" roared Bixby. "Say, what do you think I am? You can't hold me up!"

"Oh, I don't want to, Earl. I don't want to. But you see, I put twelve hundred dollars into boats ten years ago and I thought I'd git 10 per cent. interest on that. You told me yourself I would. Well, I didn't, and all I got left is this here one boat. If I git twenty-five hundred dollars for her I'll only just be even, as I figure, and I had all the worry and anxiety all these years."

"You must think I'm crazy!" Bixby shouted across the water. "You can't hold me up for money like that."

Hooper took up the oars. "Oh, all right, Earl. I was afraid you wouldn't want to pay that much." He began to move the boat slowly away from the fence posts.

"Here, wait a minute, you old fool. I'll give you a hundred dollars, and that's robbery."

"No, Earl, my price is twenty-five hundred, just as I said."

"Well, you sure have got some nerve."

"You said a man had to have that. You said yourself that most men didn't get nowhere because they didn't have any nerve. I got a lot of respect for your opinion, Earl." The boat began to move off into the stream.

Earl Bixby stood with the brown water lapping his shoes. He cajoled, abused, threatened and gesticulated. Old Ben Hooper and his boat moved slowly away.

Then Bixby went back to the buggy and started to get in when faintly, far up the valley, a train whistled. The effect on Bixby was much the same as though an electric current had passed through him. He stiffened and took his foot off the step; took a few steps up and down the road. Then he came down to the shore and his round face was a battlefield of emotions.

"Hey," he cried, "come back here, you old robber! You got a strangle hold on me. I got to get out to Brompton this morning and that's all there is to it."

Ben Hooper slowly pulled the boat around and brought it close to the shore.

"Don't buy her if you don't think she's worth it to you, Earl." Ben tried hard to keep the excitement out of his voice.

"Oh, shut up!" Bixby grunted. "Bring your old tub in here!"

"Well, when do I get the money?"

"Oh, I'll pay you all right. Don't worry about that."

"I ain't exactly worryin', but I got to get the money right away."

"You don't think I've got twenty-five hundred dollars on me, do you?"

"Well, mebbe not, but you just give me a cheque so as I can get it cashed uptown to the bank soon as it opens and 'fore you get a chance to change your mind."

It may have been my imagination, but Bixby actually seemed to have grown smaller. He squirmed and twisted and protested while the crowd murmured and nudged around him.

"You better hurry up, Earl," Thomas urged; "that was Bingly the train was a whistlin' fer. She'll be here in a minute."

They all crowded around him. I saw a drop of rain drip from his hat brim down on a bit of pink paper in the folding cheque book which he had extracted from an inside pocket. As he scratched marks on the paper, the prow of Ben's ancient vessel grounded on the road.

The crowd opened up and the pink slip passed into Ben's hand, which trembled.

"There, you old bandit," Bixby said. "I guess that evens us up!"

I thought that the edge of a smile twitched the corners of his small eyes ironically. He was that sort of a man. There were things he understood, respected. He could understand coercion.

Ben Hooper's mouth opened and shut but no words came, only a sort of gasp.

The big man thrust him aside and climbed gingerly into the wet boat. The oars made terrible splashings and for a moment I was afraid he might not be able to manage the craft in the yellow current. But, after all, he'd been brought up in the country and wasn't so helpless as he seemed. Gradually the boat headed around and sidled, like an angry crab, toward the other shore. The oars came up very high and spatted the water savagely when they went down.

"Earl wouldn't never win no boat races," Thomas observed, and the crowd chuckled.

They hung at the water's edge, murmuring, intent. The train could be seen creeping under the opposite hills. A white ball rose as it whistled. We saw Bixby turn round and then bend to his task more vigorously. There was something exceedingly humorous about the way he sidled along. He landed with a jolt just as the train pulled in and we saw him wave his arms and scramble out. He stood up, turned around and gave the poor old boat a bitter kick which sent it sailing out into the stream where it floated stolidly away.

The crowd relaxed then. They slapped Ben on the back and all talked at once.

Everyone but Hooper. He seemed completely overwhelmed. All he could do was to take off that old hat and slap it violently against his thigh in spite of the rain.

A sort of triumphant procession of which he was the centre streamed back uptown.

Ben seemed trying to say something, but he stammered a good deal. I couldn't make out the words at first, but finally his voice grew stronger.

"Gosh! Don't know as I ought o' done that," he was saying. "I didn't calc'late to be mean to Earl. But I reckoned I'd never get another chance to make up to Nettie fer all—fer all——"

He broke off and I saw there were tears in his eyes.

(The End.)

Being Bored.

Those who are bored have meager intellectual resources. An education is ineffectual if it does not make a man a good companion for himself. The comradeship we cannot shake off, our own society, makes the larger part of the difference between an enjoyable life and a dull one.

"The eye sees what it brings the means of seeing," and a mind perceives or a heart feels to the measure of its own capacity. It is an indictment often brought against our age that the present generation must be constantly thrilled and stimulated. But there never was an era in which there were not elders who deplored the mad rush of their juniors in the light-heeled train of folly. No period has had a monopoly either of the sober philosophers or of the incurably frivolous seekers after pleasure.

The ones who tire of living, lose their enthusiasm, let their optimism be quenched by bad luck or disaster are likely to be those who have everything they want without working for it. The happiest are the busiest. Their recreation is crowded into the intervals between working hours of intense concentration. Vacations are enjoyable because they have been richly earned. What does rest mean to a man who has always been resting? What does amusement mean to one who devotes his time to it?

The great delight of being with young children is that, with all the world new and strange to them, they are pleased with lots of things that give no fresh sensation to jaded and sophisticated adults. No trait of childhood is more desirable and endearing than the spontaneous delight in things that do not cost much and are easy to make or to do. There is something wrong with a program for "childhood's sunny hour" that fills them with costly entertainment and complicated toys. A childhood thus amused points to a maturity that will have seen all the sights, heard all the sounds, tested every sensation and found them all futile and vain.

Sentence Sermons.

We Must Eliminate—The spirit of revenge if we ever realize international peace.

—The spirit of fear if we are ever to know God.

—The demon of jealousy if we expect to build a happy home.

—All trace of envy if we aspire to happiness.

—All trace of hypocrisy if we attempt to train little children.

—All suspicions if we expect to enjoy our friends.

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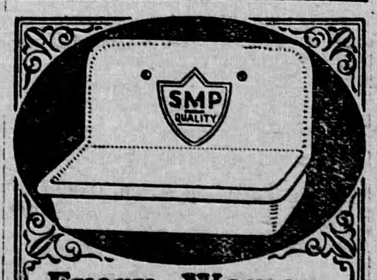

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